DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 211 974 CS 206 688

AUTHOR Farrell, Edmund J.
TITLE Ruminations on Conditions Essential to Secondary English Curricula.
PUB DATE Nov 81
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (71st, Boston, MA, November 20-25, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Needs; Educational Trends; *English Curriculum; *English Instruction; Instructional Materials; Public Opinion; Secondary Education; *Teaching Conditions

ABSTRACT

There are four conditions essential to developing and maintaining sound English curricula in the secondary schools. The first condition is that society hold public school education in sufficient respect that education can attract teaching candidates who are emotionally mature and committed to high intellectual and technical standards. More than just high salaries, this means a high public regard for the purpose and judgment of the profession. The second condition is a long overdue alteration of the prevailing model of public school education, a model that was derived from industry at the turn of the century and one that is increasingly obsolete in a society far more reliant on information processing than on the linear production of goods. The third condition is that teachers must have adequate instructional materials. This includes many books and magazines (censorship not withstanding), audio and visual equipment, and computer terminals. And the fourth condition is that the skills and content of English must logically cohere and be intelligently related to the processes of speaking, writing, reading, listening, and viewing. Literature and rhetoric must be intrinsically related to each other and to their overriding and generative source, language. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Edmund J. Farrell
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☑ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED211974

RUMINATIONS ON CONDITIONS ESSENTIAL TO SECONDARY ENGLISH CURRICULA

Edmund J. Farrell, University of Texas at Austin

Concerns about secondary English curricula abound at present: how to build a sound curriculum, a concern Allan Glatthorn treats in *A Guide for Developing an English Curriculum for the Eighties* (NCTE, 1980); what curricular mode--process, heritage, or competency--to employ as determiner of content and pedagogy, a concern leisurely explored in *Three Language-Arts Curriculum Models: Pre-Kindergarten through College* (NCTE, 1980); how to define and evaluate competencies in English, a concern examined in depth in *The Nature and Measurement of Competency in English* (NCTE, 1981).

These concerns are matters of moment, deserving the lengthy treatises they have received. Rather than do them disservice by dealing with them perfunctorily in this article, I would prefer to attend to another--equally important I believe--concern: the societal, institutional, and professional conditions that must obtain to assure healthy development and maintenance of the curriculum, regardless of the curricular model to be adopted or the specified competencies to be taught.

The first essential condition, I believe, is that the society hold public-school education in sufficient respect that education can attract to it candidates for teaching who are emotionally mature and committed to high intellectual and ethical standards. Just as the principal has been found essential to

CS206888

whatever intellectual tone exists in a school, the teacher has consistently been found essential to whatever intellectual and emotional climate exists in the classroom.

Although I strongly advocate higher salaries for teachers, I am not convinced that high salaries will alone attract competent college students to the teaching of English. Teaching has always been a poorly paid enterprise; at least it has been so for the thirty years I have engaged in its practice. But when I entered thirty years ago this year, I knew that in addition to my $217.00 per month take-home pay, I could anticipate a modicum of respect from the community. No such fringe benefit seems available to novices today.

For a decade we have found the deficiencies of public-school education headlined, so we should not be surprised that as a body, those currently entering education score in the bottom quintile of the SAT examination or that their academic ability is lower than at any other time in the past fifty years. About the problem of attracting more competent candidates to teaching, J. Myron Atkin, dean of the Stanford School of Education, said in an address to the Faculty Senate on January 8, 1981:

> What can be done? There are no simple answers, of course. But perhaps the time is right to emphasize the academic side of a high school education. Regardless of the debates about the schools as instruments for social change, there is full agreement by all parties that one unquestioned purpose of these institutions is to prepare educated people.

Then, lest he be misunderstood, Dean Atkins went on to say the following:

> I do not dispute the fact that schooling serves many purposes for the youngster and for society. It can enhance status. It helps to solidify a sense of community purpose. It prepares people for employment. It develops life-long interests. It provides social and psychological services. It offers custodial care. But no matter how well or poorly it performs these functions, its first responsibility is to do those things that are associated in the public mind with the outcomes of schooling, namely, to develop the intellectual powers of individual children and to help them comprehend their heritage.

But the schools cannot achieve such ends if teaching continues to be viewed in the public eye as a vocational dumping ground for the intellectually inept. To attract students who are academically competent as well as humane to the teaching of English, I believe that NCTE will have to move in concert with other educational associations and agencies to alter the image of public-school education. Clearly a self-fulfilling prophecy seems to be at work: the more that schools are demeaned, the greater the number of able teachers they lose, and the greater the number of marginally qualified candidates they gain. Without first-rate teachers in the classroom, the English curriculum is debased, no matter what processes have gone into its development or how sterling it might appear on paper.

Attracting and keeping competent teachers of English will take far more than media hype, however. It will take a long-overdue alteration of the prevailing model of public-school education, a model that was derived from industry at the turn of this century and one that is

increasingly obsolete in a cybernated society, a society far more reliant on information processing than on the linear production of goods. The present model makes analogous school buildings to industrial plants ("school plant planning"), school administrators to factory employers, teachers to workers on an industrial line, and students to packaged products. It allies administrators with the business community (how many classroom teachers belong to the Rotary? the Kiwanis? the Lions Club?), surrounds the administrators with the secretarial help and office machinery that befit professionals, and pays them semi-professional to professional salaries. It segments knowledge by the bell and tallies it by Carnegie units, makes teachers into petty clerks and drudges, and pays them less than garbagemen earn.

Teaching could be, should be, a profession. But it is not and will not be until teachers are better paid, until they have available to them the same secretarial assistance and office machinery--typewriters, telephones, duplicating machines, and computers--now available to administrators, until they have the paraprofessional assistance that would permit them to lecture, structure small group discussions, or conduct tutorials, depending upon the content to be learned and the abilities of a given class.

The problem with the curricular innovations or reforms of the past three decades is that they have had to be conceptually squeezed into an a priori, archaic, linear, factory model of curriculum. A major reconception of public-school education, is imperative, a reconception that

would make schools answerable to the 21st Century, in which present students will spend the majority of their lives. I would hope that NCTE, particularly through its Commission on the Curriculum, would be in the vanguard of educational associations arguing for a less linear, more individualized, more humane, and more efficient, if you will, design for schooling. Such a design must needs end the corrosive adversarial relationship between administrators and teachers, recasting the former not as employers but as persons serving the classroom needs of teachers and the latter not as employees but as individuals serving the educational needs of students.

Although major reformation of education-as-institution will be a laborious and wrenching process, it must ineluctably occur, I believe, if the schools are to survive the end of this century. During the throes of that reformation and until a brighter educational day has dawned, teachers of English will, perforce, continue to try to do their best, a best that will remain unattainable unless they have at their disposal adequate instructional materials. I have bemoaned elsewhere ("Literature in Crisis," *The English Journal*, January 1981), the escalating costs of paperback books, costs that have helped spell an end to multi-elective courses and that have returned to ascendancy the hardback anthology, a much tamer anthology, however, than that of yore, one domesticized by such renowned literary critics as Mel and Norma Gabler of Longview, Texas. The consequence of censorial attacks is a widening gulf between the candor of

content available to students on T.V., film, and record and the puerility of content found in literature available to them in the schools. For the Casper Milquetoast quality of anthologies, I blame not the publishers but our own ineptitude in failing to counterattack effectively those who find offensive anything outside their shallow perception of the good, the true, and the beautiful. I can only hope that Norman Lear and People for the American Way can be more effective in the next few years than has been NCTE in halting textbook attacks by those more righteous than most English teachers, more certain by far of what should and should not be read, by adolescents.

Obviously, I believe that books, lots of books, are essential to the English classroom, as are magazines in profusion. Unlike chemistry teachers, most of us occupy classrooms barren of the subject we teach. Beyond books and magazines, I would want record and cassette players, and at least one videotape recorder, film projector, television set, and radio in each of our classrooms. Students should have ready access to recordings of drama, poetry, and fiction, to the best that radio, film, and television have offered or can offer. To provide them with less is covertly to communicate that English is a subject alien to the world they occupy, an electronic oral-aural-visual environment from which they derive much of their entertainment, if not most of their values.

Beyond these materials, I would want computers and carrels within short range of the classroom, if not within

the classroom itself. Further, I would relinquish to the computer what the computer does best: teaching with infinite patience those aspects of the subject that easily lend themselves to pattern practice--spelling, decoding, syntax or grammar, punctuation, strategies of organization for composing, and so on. I would reserve for the teacher of English the humanistic core of the subject, that which requires interaction among human beings--structuring small group discussions; making large class presentations; holding tutorials; steering students through the writing process; tailoring individual, group, and class assignments; evaluating progress, and conferencing frequently with students.

Despite the inadequate salaries paid teachers and the declining population of the schools, the financial costs of education have escalated in the past decade faster than has inflation, a consequence in good part of federal legislation and judicial actions that have required boards of education to provide funds for busing students to desegregated schools and for educating the handicapped. Increased expenditures at a time when students are fewer have resulted in tax-payer revolts at the polls, with teachers long tenured being sent dismissal slips. In September, 1981, the Secretary of Education, T. H. Bell, announced that classrooms would contain 870,000 fewer children that fall, while the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association estimated that between 44,000 and 55,000 teachers would be laid off. Worse, despite rising costs, the National Center

for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that the educational system has consistently lost during the past decade 25 percent of its clientele, students who have failed to graduate from high school.

I cannot help feeling that far too many schools are, at present, inhospitable, inhumane places for both students and teachers. If the resources of the continuing revolution in electronics can make schools more inviting places to attend, if they can free teachers and students from the heaviest shackles of the industrial model of education, if they can reduce instructional costs while providing greater opportunities for an enriched humanistic education, then we should champion rather than resist their use.

Let me assure you that one of those resources, the computer, is making fast encroachments into education, with NCES reporting in fall 1981 that at least one microcomputer or terminal was then in use for students in about 25 percent of the nation's schools. In 1980, the schools spent $35 million on computers; by 1985, they are expected to spend $145 million in constant dollars. Moreover, homeowners by that year are expected to expend $475 million on microcomputers. On August 23, 1981, Andrew Pollack reported in *The New York Times* that

> ...companies that are going after the home market are also going after the educational market. "There's not anyone in the business who hasn't zeroed in on education as an area they want to do well in," John V. Roach, president of Tandy, said. Manufacturers are lining up with publishers of educational materials to write programs for the computers. They are offering computers at rock-bottom prices to get their brands into the

> classroom. "I think it's an investment marketplace," William J. Turner, consumer group marketing manager for Texas Instruments said.

NCTE, especially through the offices of its Commission on Media, can and should help guide the future development of computer-assisted instruction in English. Not to do so would be a grievous sin of professional omission.

Finally, if the English curriculum is to be sound, I believe it essential that the skills and content we call English logically cohere, that skills be intelligently related to the processes of speaking, writing, reading, listening, and viewing, and that literature and rhetoric be intrinsically related to each other and to their overriding and generative source, language.

I have been worried of late by what appears to be the rapid growth of a writing industry, one similar to the reading industry, filled with too many specialists who justify their existence by finding problems that no one else ever knew existed. More fatal to English, and, one might add, to competent if not artistic writing, is the widening schism between literature and composition that has attended the growth of the industry. As E. D. Hirsch, Jr., laments in "Culture and Literacy," an article appearing in the Fall/Winter 1980 issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, college teachers of literature now hustle off to the conventions of the Modern Language Association, while college teachers of composition swarm to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and ne'er the twain

conceptually meet. Mr. Hirsch writes,

> Every teacher of writing should ideally be also a teacher of literature in its broadest sense. The teacher of literacy needs also to be a teacher of cultural literacy. The worst of all worlds would be to have separate courses conducted by different technocratic specialists in reading, in writing, and in literature--that world towards which we are now moving.

Cultural literacy implies, according to Mr. Hirsch, "teaching shared knowledge about ourselves, our history and our world, our laws, our political, economic, and social arrangements, our classical texts from a great many domains including TV, the movies, and literature." He then adds, "The hope that an invisible hand will somehow integrate the fragmented knowledge that we convey in our schools is beginning to lose its appeal, as we infer from the reinstitution of required courses in the colleges."

I conclude by pleading that the NCTE Commission on the Curriculum become the visible hand, if not an iron hand, in making the English curriculum a coherent body of skills and content, one to be taught by persons with the breadth and depth of knowledge sufficient to honor the interrelatedness of the whole rather than to pay undue homage to any one of its parts.